

## Food for Thought

A narrative essay by John-Pierre Kiraz

I grew up in the densely Lebanese populated suburb of Bankstown in Sydney, Australia where English felt like a second language. My family consists of my father, mother, three older brothers and a hefty extended family. My parents were born in Lebanon and migrated to Sydney in the early 70s to 'try their luck' in building a future. They had all their children in Australia, and here-in lays the issue. For years, I was perplexed with my identity; however, food was always the thing that brought me back to my core and reminded me of who and what I am. There is a certain charisma to Lebanese food, a certain 'chip on its shoulder' that distinctly makes it unique. Whether it be the playful crunch of toasted nuts sprinkled at the summit of an ivory bed of rice, the demanding voice of a lamb skewer exploding from the side-line "chew harder!" or the alluring smooth texture of a wickedly spiced eggplant dip, married to a jagged piece of barbeque toasted flat bread. Lebanese dishes know who they are and make no apology for it. Acquiring the ingredients needed was half the battle, mastering the threshold of use was another story. The kitchen was the blank slate that was my life; cooking was the chisel that etched my identity. These were not just ingredients used to make a delicious effervescent salad or zesty cabbage roll, these were ingredients used to make me.

It's 1992 and I'm eight years old. The sound of my parent's chatter fills the entire house, absorbed by all the walls. The windows rattle as they succumb to the onslaught of rolled r's and an avalanche of other guttural Arabic graphemes. Thick plumes of cigarette smoke waft into my bedroom and gently strangle my throat, just enough to say, 'wake up, it's 6.30am, time to get ready for school'. As I promptly make my way into the kitchen, my mother follows behind. "Make yourself something to eat, I will get some cereal ready for your brothers," she states as she continues to bless the house with heavy clouds of Winfield Blue. Although I am the youngest of four boys in a Lebanese household, it was quickly ascertained that I required the least amount of mentoring.

As my mother nurses a cigarette in one hand, with the other, she swiftly whips-up a morning spread for three naughty boys. She worked so fast and with such precision, it would be a wonder to think what she could have accomplished with two hands running concurrently to one task. Meanwhile, I'm lighting gas burners, preparing toast, and juggling cups of boiling tea to ensure I start my day 'right'. This was a stark contrast to the salty breakfast my father prepares for the *adults* in the house. Toasted flat bread with crumbling wedges of feta cheese sprinkled with dried mint and chilli powder.

My parents always spoke in Arabic to my brothers to which they always ricocheted English darts - that was the cool thing to do back then. Often my brothers' friends will call the house phone to which my mother or father would answer. "One of your friends is on the phone, hurry up, don't take too long!" my mother would spew in Arabic. "Don't speak in Arabic, it's embarrassing!" was the most common rebuttal.

As my mother sends us on our way to school, the magic begins. She starts her day by going to the Lebanese grocery store located in a suburb approximately ten kilometres away from my house - that is where the best ingredients are kept. She would forage for the leafiest greens and rosier reds, the crème de la crème of garden varieties, and she would always find them. My mother was a robust woman who could spot a 'good deal' from a mile away. By the time she finished shopping, our Ford Falcon XD was loaded with boxes of crunchy cucumbers, full-figured bunches of parsley, golden goblets of ghee and ten kilo tins of tangy tomato paste. My mother had to shop alone as there would be no room in the car for passengers once she completed her mission. On the way back home, she would often make a pit-stop at the chain supermarket atop my street to get '*food for the kids*', such as sliced loaf bread, milk, and cereal.

Meanwhile at school, I am trying my hardest to not stand out, which was easy for me. I didn't 'look' or 'sound' Lebanese as I was consistently reminded by friends. By the age of eight, I stopped taking lunch to school. I'd rather go hungry than expose my Lebanese heritage lunch box of cheese and cucumber loaf rolls, nougat and pistachio bars and glass bottles of savoury yoghurt drinks. It just didn't fit in. I would bank-up my meals for when I finished school.

As the clock in the classroom reaches 2.30pm, my stomach starts to rumble and ache with hunger. The 3.00pm bells siren - it's time to go home. As I walk out the school gates, the thought of my mother's cooking overcomes all my senses, I know something delicious is brewing in my house. The best days would be when I came home from school to find my auntie and grandmother's car parked in the driveway. I could see their car from atop my road and it always meant that something amazing was going on in the kitchen.

As I enter the house, the aroma of slow cooked seasoned meat chunks brewed in a thick tomato paste makes me salivate. Juicy kafta skewers glisten as they are stacked atop each other, creating the most delicious pyramid. The most prized real estate on the table, a massive bowl of tabouli sits centre, taking full ownership of being the 'star' of the show. Of course, long grain white-rice and angel hair pasta cooked in ghee and topped with toasted almond slithers is the staple of each meal.

5.30pm. Time for my father to brew a thick concoction of Lebanese coffee. I sit in the kitchen as I attentively watch him scoop the aromatic soot into boiling water. He carefully hovers the kettle over the gas flame in one hand and stirs with the other, dodging the heat every few seconds so the coffee doesn't bubble over. It's a delicate act to which my father is an expert. He brings the kettle into the lounge room alongside a plate of baklawa to help cut through the bitter taste of the tar beverage. The air in the living room becomes thick as a delicious fog of coffee, ghee and sugar entangles the space. The sipping of boiling coffee, crunch of filo pastry and hearty conversations, literally creates a sense of 'hot gossip'.

10.00pm. I lay in my bed replaying the day in my mind and wondering what delicious foods my mother will make tomorrow. Sometimes I would wake up in the middle of the night and sneak into the kitchen. I would often bask in the cool warmth of the golden glow upon opening the fridge door. Everything I ever wanted was

there. Chilli pickled olives, hummus dip, thin slithers of pastirma, an overflowing jug of ayran and a couple of pieces of baklawa, many of which followed me back to my bedroom. The kitchen was the safest place in the world.

It's 2001 and I'm seventeen years old. It's 6.45am and never too soon for my cantankerous auntie and her children to come barging into the lounge room. My auntie's voice can be heard halfway down my one-kilometre street, there is no way you can sleep through it, it's time for the street to wake up. My father attends to the coffee to which my auntie bellows out "don't bring any baklawa, we're all getting fat!". As I get ready for school, I pass my auntie in the lounge room. "What do you want me to cook for you today?" she demands. I remind her that I have my own money now and will most likely eat out with friends after school. She snarls at me and barks at my mother "see what is happening to our kids, they are losing their taste buds!" My mother has now delegated some shopping responsibilities to my father. She carefully creates a list in Arabic of a few choice items she would like him to collect from the local chain supermarket. Cheese, one kilo bag of basmati rice, olives, bananas, lettuce and tomato, which is fair enough seeing as my family have downsized their car to a two-door Mitsubishi Lancer. Gone the days of the Ford Falcon moving Lebanese consumable cargo across Sydney each day. My mother still had to travel for pastirma, ghee, tahini and tomato paste as the local stores didn't carry these items.

The tug-of-war between spoken English and Arabic is now more apparent. Although I'm the youngest child in my family, my Arabic was the strongest and most used. By this stage, my brothers would only use Arabic to recite the names of Lebanese dishes. If they wanted to eat a specific Lebanese food, they had to cough-up the Arabic word to the head warden.

As I would make my home from school, I would often stop at the local take-away store to get a rubbery hotdog or packet of oil drenched hot chips. The grandeur of my mother's cooking was now reserved to weekends. Monday to Friday, tabouli was switched out for a tomato and lettuce garden salad, grilled lamb chops would take the place of kafta and baklawa morphed into a store bought madeira cake. Rice was still the staple carbohydrate; however, steamed rice was far more common than ghee drenched basmati rice with angel hair pasta and scorched nuts. Simple ingredients meant my father was a lot more active in the forage for them as my mother's comfort zone for grocery travel declines to a radius of approximately three kilometres.

It's 2016 and I'm thirty years old. The smell of fresh manakish heartens me as I enter my parents' house on a Saturday morning, another product added to my father's ever-growing shopping list. The smell of the freshly cut mint and tomato fills the air. It's a far cry from what breakfast used to be, greasy eggs with sagouck isn't the healthiest way to start to the day anymore. "What do you want me to cook for you tomorrow?" my mother gleams with excitement. I would usually reply with an elaborate food, something that would take a while to make, something that requires her to travel for ingredients outside of her three-kilometre comfort zone. My

dad's shopping list would not cut it for this project. Mulukhiya was always my favourite dish, it took my mother a long time to prepare. If I wanted to eat this, I would have to put my order in weeks prior.

It was a hot summer night; I woke up at 2.30am parched and needing desperate respite from the dehydration that has overcome me. I make my way to the fridge and open the door. As I stand there motionless, the fluorescent light from my fridge scans me from head to toe like an electronic item on a production line undergoing a safety check. As I peer into the cool empty box, I begin to wonder, 'who am I?' I have never been so disappointed to see a banana, low fat milk, lettuce, and eggs. I close the door to the ice box as though slamming it would make the contents disappear, but they didn't. I reach over to the pantry and glare inside. Oats, long life milk, olive oil and tuna. This is not the fridge of my eight-year-old self. Nostalgia gallops towards me, like a war horse with a lance wielding knight. It stabs me in the heart.

As the years went on, my brothers spoken Arabic would resurface each Sunday lunch gathering. They would mostly speak in Arabic to describe the taste of the food and reminisce of their younger years. "I remember we used to not like this when we were kids," one of them would say. "You all loved eating this when you were kids, you lost your tastebuds as you grew up," my mother would snap.

It's 2022 and I'm thirty-eight years old. My mother calls me on Monday night at approximately 7.00pm, she knows that is the time I finish work. "What do you want me to cook on the weekend?" That has become one of the most difficult questions to answer these days because none of the ingredients she uses align with my health regime. "You don't eat ghee, you don't eat rice, you don't eat bread and you don't eat sugar, you should bring your own food!" she would jokingly say. One weekend, I called her bluff and bought my own lunch to her house. A simple dish of pan seared chicken and broccoli with a small portion of low-fat noodles. I did this the next week, and the next, and the next. As I sit on the dinner table that I sat on as child, I eat my lifeless food as my mother and father fluff the ghee-soaked rice on their plate and nestle in a few skewers of barbequed seasoned meat. The heat from the rice and the perfectly seasoned lamb sticks emanates from the plates and interrogates my olfactory system as if to say, "put your hands up, you fraud, this is a stick-up!" I look across the table and peer into the five-kilo jar of pickled turnips and notice the small glass bowl of zaatar mix atop it. It's as it was when I was eight. The fresh Lebanese bread is tucked away but always ready to be charged up with thick slathers of chilli-topped hummus dip and deseeded black olives, as a mouthful on-the-go. I sense the spirit of my eight-year-old self sitting next to me on the dinner table. He slaps me upside the head and releases a barrage of mind-numbing rhetoric, "what is wrong with you!"

On my way out of the house, a folded piece of paper on the floor catches my eye. I pick it up, the folds are prominent and the paper so flat. This piece of paper was special to its owner. It was clearly held close to their

chest for a long time or sat in their back pocket. It is one of my father's shopping lists. What used to be a list of Arabic hieroglyphs is now written in English. The lance wielding knight drives his sabre further into my heart, bursting the bubble of identity I thought I had.

I've heard people say 'you are what you eat' as a throw away statement to incite good eating habits; never did I think that a figure-of-speech would invoke such thoughts about my identity. What I used to eat as a child played a major role in the person I was and the values I aligned to. As my tongue became more discriminative with food, I could feel my identity change. How is it that an eight-year-old boy from my past has resurfaced and inoculated me with a potent dose of nostalgia, why now? Perhaps it is my younger self reminding me that while time seems endless, there will come a day where I will no longer sit at the dinner table that made me the man I am today. Not because I'm not invited, rather; there will be no one to visit. My mother and father will eventually run out of Sundays. No one will ask me "what do you want me to make for you?" No one will take my order a week in advance and more severely, no one will remind me of who I am.

An emotional reshuffle in my late thirties has seen an overhaul to my pantry and fridge. It will never be the 'Aladdin's cave' of wealth it was as a child, but I'm now kissed on the lips with childhood memories each time I'm in my kitchen. When I moved out of my parents' home in 2015, they gifted me the exact dinner table I used to sit at as a child. It has become my duty to respect it the way it was in its golden years. Jars of pickles, bowls of zaatar and the odd container of halawa can be found there these days. My sleuth for ingredients is more common now as I visit specific Lebanese grocery stores to find my special items. It will never be to the scale that my mother upheld in her yesteryears; but an improvement none-the-less.

As I finish work late on a Monday night, I drive past my childhood home. I park my car in the driveway and stare for a while, I can see my parents watching television. Momentarily, I envisage my eight-year-old self, bursting out of the front door with a cheese and cucumber loaf in one hand and a glass bottle of ayran in the other. I proudly walk in the house as though I have served my nation for the past five years and have finally returned. I sit next to my mother and tell her all the things I want to eat in the next few weeks. Her face lights up as she scribbles a few words on a sheet of paper and hands it to my father. The words 'milk' and 'bread' are written in Arabic; *'food for kids'* as my mother used to say. "Is this all you want me to get, are you sure?" my father blurts in a confused state. "Yes, I will have to go the Lebanese grocery store myself to get the others," my mother states with elation. I have never been so happy to see my father's shopping list see defeat. The delicious foods I used to eat as a child are no longer eating me.